

Quantock Deer Management and Conservation Group

SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION OF

Deer on the Quantocks



Populations of wild deer form an important part of the ecology and cultural history of the Quantock Hills. The good opportunities especially to observe red deer, which are far less common in most other parts of England, are valued highly by locals as well as visitors to the area.

However, unless carefully managed, excessive deer numbers may build up and lead to detrimental impacts on farming, timber production and bio-diversity. The Quantock Deer Management and Conservation Group (QDM&CG) is committed to ensuring the long-term survival of a healthy and well-distributed population of Red deer in and around the Quantock Hills in balance with its environment and other land uses.



This booklet provides information on the history, behaviour and ecology of the differing deer species found in the area, and how we aim to achieve their sustainable management.



RED DEER - BACKGROUND

Red deer are the largest of six species of deer living wild in Britain. Weights of mature males (stags) range from 90 kg up to 190 kg, and adult females (hinds) from 60 kg to 110 kg. They are a herding species, which on the Quantocks may often be seen in groups of 10 - 25 animals, but sightings of herds of 60 or more are not uncommon.

Stags and hinds form separate groups for much of the year outside the mating season. The peak mating season or rut occurs around mid-October, when loud roaring of fully grown stags is heard echoing around the coombes. At this time stags chivvy hinds to collect and defend a harem, and may fight with other stags to re-affirm their place in the hierarchy.

During March and April stags shed their antlers, which can weigh as much as 4kg each side, yet by the end of the summer re-growth of a new splendid set will be complete.

Hinds give birth to a single calf at the beginning of June. During the first two to three weeks of life the young tend to hide up alone in bracken or other dense ground cover for much of the day, until they are strong enough to keep up with the herd.



HISTORY OF RED DEER ON THE QUANTOCKS



The recent history of red deer on the Quantocks is inextricably linked to hunting with hounds. Very few deer were present on the Quantock Hills prior to 1862, when Fenwick Bissett, as master of the Devon & Somerset Staghounds, introduced red deer caught on nearby Exmoor. After several further releases of small numbers of red deer over the next 25 years, The Quantock Staghounds were first set up in 1901, but disbanded again a few years later. Around 30 red deer were present on the hills, when in 1917 Sir Dennis Boles was asked to revive the QSH by the Controller of Food



in Lloyd George's wartime cabinet. The herd was supplemented with several stags brought in from Warnham Park in Sussex, and gradually build up to several hundred animals.

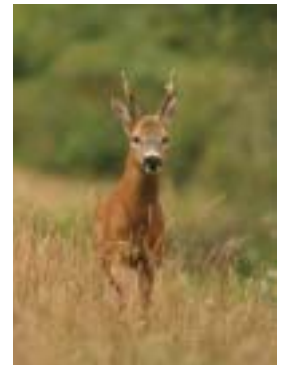
Although initially introduced for sport, hunting later developed its role to assist with deer control through culling and to help disperse large herds from farmland. Alongside rifle culls taken by individual stalkers, hunting has formed part of local deer management ever since. However, recent legislation introduced during 2005 no longer allows hunting as traditionally practised with a full pack of hounds. A more limited form of 'exempt hunting' is now employed to help flush deer from cover, and the QSH continue to provide a service to find and dispatch injured deer.

OTHER DEER SPECIES



At the end of the 19th Century red deer were the only deer species known to be resident on the Quantocks except for the occasional fallow deer escaped from nearby parks at St Audries, Nettlecombe and Dunster. Fallow deer are seen only rarely on the Quantock Hills but are common in the Brendon Hills just a few miles to the west. Aside from red deer, roe are the only other truly native deer to Britain. They are much smaller than red deer, no more than about 75 cm at the shoulder and adults weighing 18-32 kg. Although common in England in medieval times roe became extinct by the 17th century except near the border with Scotland. Their distribution remained restricted to northern England, Norfolk and the Southeast until the 1920's, but helped by woodland planting schemes roe have since steadily re-colonised most English counties. On the Quantocks roe were still seen only rarely until the 1960s, but have increased significantly and are now present in small numbers in most woodlands in and around the Quantocks.

Roe Buck



Muntjac deer are another species which is beginning to colonise the area; these Asian deer were first introduced to parks in the South East around 1900 and following escapes and releases have spread through much of England with numbers in the wild now estimated at over 100,000 nationwide. They were first noted on the Quantocks in the 1980s, and although sightings have been reported at several different locations, their numbers appear to remain low at present.

Muntjac Buck



HABITATS AND DIET

Red deer are well adapted for grazing on pastures, herbs, tree mast and crops, but also able to utilise woody vegetation such as tree leaves, twigs and heather. Nowadays red deer are as likely to be seen feeding or lying up within grass leys and agricultural crops on the low lying farms surrounding the Quantocks, as in the woods and moorland on the Hills.

Roe deer will also utilise a wide range of habitats, but prefer areas offering at least some patches of dense cover. They are more selective feeders than red deer, browsing by choice on nutritious plant parts such as buds and leaves of brambles and roses, herbs, ivy, young shoots and leaves of both deciduous and conifer trees, cereals and grasses. Muntjac have similar habitat and food preferences to roe, but take an even more diverse diet of shrubs, herbs, nuts, fruits, coppice shoots, and unfortunately also bluebells, primroses, dog's mercury and many other native flowers.



POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACTS

Red deer are the largest terrestrial wild mammals remaining in Britain, and their continued presence on the Quantocks gives pleasure to many people. In addition to their aesthetic appeal, deer present a renewable resource of meat and provide recreational opportunities for those who hunt or shoot for sport. At moderate density deer activity can also help to maintain or improve some habitats for other wildlife. However, when present at high density deer may cause significant impacts. Damage to trees occurs from browsing of the leading shoots of planted and self-sown seedlings, as well as fraying of young saplings by antler rubbing, and stripping or scoring bark of older trees. Overgrazing by deer, combined in some cases with that of domestic sheep on common land, can also affect the composition of semi-natural woods, as species such as willow, hazel and oak gradually become replaced by less palatable ones such as birch, alder, and sitka spruce.

Large herds of red deer on grassland are of concern to many Quantock farmers especially during early spring when grazing is at a premium. Within agricultural crops, especially cereals, deer may cause damage through trampling and feeding on ripening corn, while regular passage of large deer herds across field boundaries incurs costly repairs to hedgerows, banks and fences. The ever increasing volume of traffic on our roads combined with high deer numbers also leads to numerous collisions of deer and vehicles around the Quantocks, often with very serious consequences.



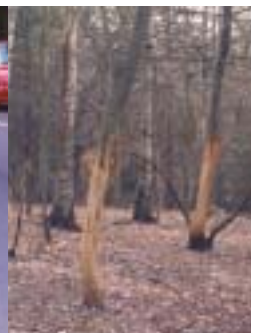
Herd of stags in cereal crop



Damaged maize crop



Road accident



Bark Stripping



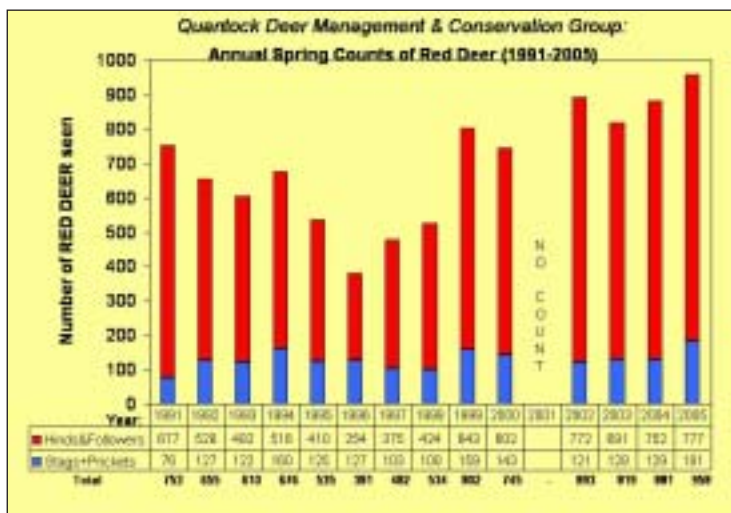
POPULATION DYNAMICS AND CONTROL

The rate of natural increase of deer populations is closely linked to their body condition and environment. The temperate climate, abundance of natural forage as well as ready access to pastures and farm crops have helped the red deer on the Quantocks to remain one of the finest herds in the country. Under the more severe conditions of the Scottish Highlands many red hinds do not breed for the first time until their third year and calve only every other year thereafter. However, on the Quantocks close to 75% of hinds have been found to conceive at just 17 months old, and over 90% of older hinds calve each year. At present population levels this will usually result in 350 or more new red deer calves being born in and around the Quantocks each year.



Roe deer have the potential to increase at an even greater rate, as given good conditions most females will produce twins.

In former times the growth of deer populations were moderated by large predators such as wolves. Aside from foxes and stray dogs, however, which may occasionally take some newly born fawns, Britain now lacks significant natural predators. Some two to three percent of the Quantock herd do become casualties in traffic accidents, but natural mortality among the deer is very low indeed. Thus, unless numbers are kept in check through culling the population would increase rapidly, as would impacts on the environment and costs of crop protection using tree guards and fencing. The precise size of annual cull required depends on local objectives and the breakdown of the population by sex and age, but to prevent further increases of the Quantock red deer herd as a whole at least 20% of all females present during autumn need to be removed every year; a greater percentage than this needs to be culled if seeking a long-term reduction in the size of the herd. To contain further increases among local roe populations cull requirements are likely to lie between 25 - 30%.



POPULATION SIZE AND RECENT TRENDS



Numbers of wild deer are notoriously difficult to count accurately as many tend to be missed in concealing cover. Nevertheless, visual spring counts have been organised each year by the QDM&CG ever since 1990, and provide a guide to changes in the population over the years. The counts are organised with the help of the AONB Service and 50 or so local volunteers, each of which is allocated an area within which to search and record all deer seen during the time of the count. Comparison of the counts obtained over the years show that total numbers seen have risen significantly over the

last decade, with over 800 red deer being recorded in each of the last three years. This is a higher number than is believed to have been present at any time during the last two centuries. In fact prior to 1960, the red deer population was never reported to have exceeded 350 head. Although overall numbers of red deer have increased significantly in the last ten years, no parallel rise has been noted in the number of stags and prickets (yearling male), leading to an increasingly female biased population sex ratio.

During the annual count a much lower proportion of roe and muntjac are likely to be seen by observers than in the case of the much larger red deer. Nevertheless, the number of roe seen during recent counts have doubled in comparison to the 1990's, with near to one hundred recorded in most years, while sightings of muntjac still rarely exceed one or two.



QUANTOCK DEER MANAGEMENT & CONSERVATION GROUP (QDM&CG)

Deer, especially red deer, do not adhere to landownership boundaries. Hinds will commonly range over 250 to 500 hectares of land on a weekly if not daily basis, and stags tend to live in quite separate summer and winter ranges often located several miles apart. It is therefore important that landholders occupying sections of continuous deer range exchange information and co-operate to achieve sustainable management of the population. The QDM&CG was formed in 1991, to promote greater liaison on deer management matters between landholders, environmental organisations, the local hunt, deer stalkers and other interested parties concerned with the welfare and management of deer on the Quantocks.

Aims and policies

- The group is committed to ensuring the long-term survival of a healthy and well-distributed population of red deer in and around the Quantock Hills in balance with its environment and other land uses.
- The main red deer range and area of interest of QDM&CG now covers nearly 200 square km (see Map). The group aims to provide a forum for open discussion and overview throughout that area, and to promote a responsible and sensitive approach to the management of wild deer by experienced, trained personnel.
- The group recognises that effective co-operation among all two hundred or so different landholdings within the whole management area is difficult to achieve not least in view of local variation in land uses. The formation of localised sub-groups (under the umbrella of QDM&CG) is therefore encouraged to stimulate improved co-ordination of deer management efforts among neighbouring landholders where this is considered helpful. Such groups should liaise closely with QDM&CG to facilitate exchange of information between sub-groups and to avoid conflicts of interests; one representative from any sub-group should ideally also attend meetings of QDM&CG.
- QDM&CG will continue to conduct an annual deer count throughout the region to monitor trends in numbers by species, and ratios of males to females across years; and will collate information on reported culls and other losses to allow assessment of the effects of control measures taken.
- Decisions on what may be the optimal population size towards which management should be geared, as well as its distribution across the management area, requires much further consultation with individual landholders and local sub-groups. However, while most local landowners agree that current deer numbers are excessive, a population based on between 400 – 450 red deer noted at the annual spring count is believed to constitute a sustainable population size for the longer term.
- In addition the group has agreed that if consecutive annual counts should ever indicate that numbers are likely to have fallen to below about 300 head the QDM&CG will call on its members and others to introduce minimal or no-cull policies, until such a point that numbers and age/sex breakdown are considered to have recovered to a satisfactory level. Such a minimum figure is intended merely as a 'safety' net, so that action can be initiated in good time should the conservation of the population ever become threatened.





- The presence of good numbers of mature stags in the population is desirable to maintain genetic diversity, as well as for aesthetic reasons. A deer population with a sex ratio heavily skewed in favour of females is also harder to control due to the associated higher rate of increase. The QDM&CG will therefore aim to maintain a well balanced population with an adult sex ratio no greater than 2 : 1 (Hinds : Stags & Prickets).
- The annual off-take required to maintain healthy red and roe deer populations on the Quantocks also forms a sustainable resource that can help off-set part of the costs of deer damage, control and crop protection. The group will explore via Quantock Food Link opportunities to help market local venison more effectively possibly through development of a land holders cooperative.



LAW AND CLOSE SEASONS

Anyone involved in deer control should ensure they are familiar with all of the detailed provisions regarding permitted weapons and ammunitions as laid down in the Deer Act (1991). In particular it should be noted that unless special exemptions apply, it is considered an offence if any person takes or intentionally kills any deer during the prescribed close season or at night. In England the relevant **Close Seasons** are currently as follows:

MALES:	Red & Fallow & Sika : 1 May – 31 July;	Roe bucks: 1 November – 31 March
FEMALES:	Red & Fallow & Sika : 1 March – 31 October;	Roe does: : 1 March – 31 October

There is no close season for Muntjac at present as they do not have a specific season when most young are born; however, some of the provisions of the Deer Act, including some close seasons, are currently being reviewed by DEFRA.



GETTING INVOLVED

Part of the present exercise is to encourage co-operation and sharing of knowledge, and to make use of the extensive range of expertise which is available to assist with differing aspects of deer management.

The present membership of the group is made up of individual Quantock landholders, as well as representatives of organisations including English Nature, Friends of Quantocks, Forestry Commission, National Trust, DEFRA, British Deer Society, The Quantock Stagholders, The Deer Initiative, BASC, and the Quantock AONB Service. Anyone interested in becoming more closely involved with the QDM&CG, or formation of a local sub-group, or has suggestions or comments regarding the content of this leaflet please contact us at the address overleaf.



To contact QDM&CG write to:

The Secretary, QDM&CG, c/o Quantock AONB Service, Castle Street,
Nether Stowey, Bridgwater, Somerset TA5 1BA;
or **email: qdmcg@langbein.freeserve.co.uk**

The Quantock Rangers team can also be contacted
at the above address.

Tel. 01278 732845,
email: quantockhills@somerset.gov.uk



The Quantock Staghounds live-deer casualty service can be contacted on
Tel. 01823 432269

General information on deer and their management is also available from:

The Deer Initiative, PO Box 2196, Wrexham, LL14 6YH, **Tel. 07966 966389,**
www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk

The British Association for Shooting & Conservation, Marford Mill, Rossett,
Wrexham, LL12 0HL **Tel. 01244 573047 www.basc.org.uk**

The British Deer Society, Fordingbridge, Hampshire, SP6 1EF.
Tel. 01425 655434, www.bds.org.uk

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